Title: Interview with Cynthia “Cindy Lou” Freeman

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Interviewer(s): Carolyn Kio and Will Schatz

Interviewee: Cynthia Freeman

Introduction: Cynthia Freeman (Cindy Lou), speaks about her life and experiences in Crisfield, after moving from Baltimore County in 1987. Freeman reflects on how flooding and hurricanes have affected her home life, hobbies, her community and ultimately, her future in Crisfield.

[Transcription begins]

Carolyn Kio (Kio): Alright, so my name is Carolyn Kio and-

Will Schatz (Schatz): I'm Will Schatz.

Cynthia Freeman (Freeman): Hi.

Kio: We're here with Cynthia Freeman today at the Crisfield Public Library on Tuesday, April 3rd, 2025.

Schatz: The first question is, how long have you lived in the Crisfield area?

Freeman: Oh my goodness, I moved here from Baltimore County, Maryland in 1987, October of 1987. Gosh, I don't know, let's see, how many years is that. Anybody got a calculator? I'm sure it's like close to 50 years now. Gosh, yeah, since 1987, I don't know exactly how many years that is off-hand.

Schatz: 38.

Freeman: 38. There you go. I've been here 38 years.

Kio: And why do you come to Crisfield?

Freeman: Well, my husband transferred down with the new prison, Eastern Correctional Institution. We were living, he was working at the House of Corrections and we needed a bigger house. So, as soon as they built the prison, without really checking out the area, we moved to the Eastern Shore so that we could get out of the area we were in.

Schatz: How has Crisfield changed since you moved?

Freeman: Well, it's, it was a dramatic change coming from a big city and move into a small town. That was a culture shock a little bit for me because I was used to five minutes, three minutes down the road, being able to access things. And when I got to Crisfield, it was like a route, you know, it was it- it, especially back then. Crisfield back then was completely different from now. I mean, culturally, even going to a basketball game, it was a shock to me because one side of the auditorium, there were black people. And on my side, white people. And I sat on the black side and was told to move. So that was a shock to me, because that kind of stuff never went on in Baltimore, you know. My children fit in very well with the locals. I had a little bit more of a problem making friends because most of the women here, their grandmothers went to the same school. And I couldn't tell you where any of the people I graduated from, you know, I mean I had this huge school. So it was really hard to fit in. But, you know, after the amount of time I've been here, everything's kind of changed since then, a little different.

Schatz: What keeps you at Crisfield?

Freeman: I love Crisfield. I love being in a small town. There's a lot of things about Crisfield now I don't like, and one of which is the constant flooding. I'm considering actually moving because I'm tired of the constant, constant flooding. It used to be we would only flood, my house is right on Maryland Avenue across from Hebron Bank. And we would only flood during the hurricanes, which you expect. Now it's sometimes weekly, sometimes it lasts for days. So yeah, it's getting to be a very big problem.

Kio: What are some of your most cherished memories of Crisfield?

Freeman: Um, the Christmas tours. I loved when back in the day we had more socialization, it seemed to kind of wane before COVID and after COVID everything has kind of stopped. My family still loves to visit here, from Baltimore. There's not much to do here, but I do love, you know, one of the best things about living in Crisfield is the water. And one of the worst things about living in Crisfield is the water.

Schatz: How do you entertain yourself in Crisfield?

Freeman: Well, I'm a big gardener, and I'm very active in my church. I run the Crisfield Community Garden, which keeps me very busy. We work with the Somerset Developmental Center. So we work with handicapped people who come down and get out of this center and work in the garden. We also now have partnered with U.M., the University of Maryland Eastern Shore, who has been working and helping us. So, that keeps me busy, and I have four children and 12 grandchildren, so I'm not lacking in things to keep me busy, that's for sure.

Schatz: Do you attend any community events regularly?

Freeman: I try to, if it's interesting to me, or if the price is, there's not too many community events here. And when they do happen, they're not advertised very well. Sometimes you find out on the day it's happening, that kind of thing. But if, you know, they just had a town hall meeting here, I try to get involved in what's going on in town. But there's not too many community events that goes on here.

Kio: Alright, and going back to, you mentioned as the water, what role does the waterfront of the Chesapeake Bay play in recreation and social life for our community?

Freeman: Well, most people here, including myself, either have some kind of a boat. I join the marina each year, which gives me access to a pool and golf carts and bikes. I enjoy the sunsets here, are beautiful and sitting at the dock and the water is a very big draw to me, when it's not flooding me. [laughter and pauses]

Schatz: Have you noticed in the land, weather, and water, or flooding in Crisfield, have you noticed changes?

Freeman: Yes. When I first moved here in '87, we didn't get any floods until the first flood that hit us, I believe, was Floyd. And I was coming home from work and I couldn't get to my house and I had to park and walk through water this deep, and when it floods in a hurricane, it's not clean water. It picks up paint cans, oil, anything that's in people's garages, so it's black, oily water. And, you know, then we didn't flood again until Isabel, and then all the trees in my backyard came down and my house looked like Jurassic Park and we flooded bad then. The worst was Sandy. Sandy was an absolute nightmare. I lost so much. And now it's flooding on a high moon, a high tide, and we have no warning. You know, we live in a day and age where we can see the weatherman warning you that a hurricane's coming. Now there's no warning. The flood comes up, it gets in your garages, it- it ruins tools, lawnmowers. I mean, it's just ridiculous. And I like to garden and I pay high taxes in Maryland and I pay high taxes to live in the city of Crisfield and I can't, as a gardener, I can't plant anything because the saltwater destroys everything, so, it doesn't seem fair to me that I'm paying on land that I can't use, you know.

Kio: Yeah, I completely agree, so it seems like it has, like, greatly affected your daily life. [inaudible]

Freeman: Oh yeah, oh yeah, I mean I went to bed during Sandy and the water was up. I live in a big old Victorian and that's from Holland Island that had to be moved off of the island because of the island's sinking.

Kio: Oh wow.

Freeman: You know, and then here I am thinking, you know, this house might have to be moved one day again. But I went to bed and the water was up to my front porch and my house is

up high. And I, when I got up the next morning, I opened my bedroom door, looked downstairs like Dorothy and the Wizard of Oz is this water in my house. It didn't come in my house, but unfortunately over the years I've had to pay high flood insurance policies because we had our furnace, our water heater, everything in a semi-basement. Yeah, I had a basement in Crisfield. And over the years, we've had to have claims on our insurance to move everything up. So now we have a heat pump elevated, our water tank heater had to be put up higher in our house. I mean, it's just been one thing after the next with this flooding. And the city doesn't maintain anything either. So that doesn't help. You know, we have floodgates that don't work, my ditch in my backyard is city owned, and it's never been cleaned out since I've lived here, and this is since 1987.

Kio: And so, do you have any like personal plans to deal with flooding? Like a list or a checklist or something that you guys might follow?

Freeman: Well, when we know a hurricane's coming, we do, of course, go out in the yard, pick everything up, anything in the garage, which is hard. It- it consumes a lot of time. Everything that we can, we get up, paint cans, things like that. But there's not much you can do. We did leave the house during Isabel because of concerns about trees because our backyard at that time was full of trees, but what happens is when all this water sits there for a few days before the tide goes out, the whole root system comes up. It- it not just the tree that falls over during the wind. It soaks and then, you know, like I said, my yard looked like Jurassic Park, and the problem is unless a tree falls on a, on a piece of your house, insurances don't pay for it, and so you're stuck with the cost of digging up trees and stuff like that.

Kio: Um, and have you seen others prepare in similar ways for the events having to clean up their yards and such?

Freeman: During Sandy, we didn't realize that it was going to be that bad. No one gave us pre-warnings. I mean, this thing kind of turned and hit Crisfield. And a lot of the residents in Crisfield abandoned houses because they had no flood insurance. So there wasn't much cleanup after Sandy, and from what I believe and have the city got a lot of money and Sandy repair funds that disappeared. So, there was no help from FEMA or the community or the city governments to help residents. They didn't even send a truck around so you could throw in things that were damaged. So, if you were a senior citizen or, you know, landlords kind of abandoned their tenants. It was, it was really, and some people never came back after Sandy. They just abandoned their houses and left.

Kio: Just to follow up to that, has the flooding impacted your ability or your husband's ability to go to work some days?

Freeman: Some days. We're both retired, but, of course, during the hurricanes or and during some of the major flooding, I've had children who live in my house that could not get to work.

Now when the flood comes, I had a flood once that was unpredicted, and it came up and it ruined my headlights of my car. And I have one of these cars that have to be broken and $700 to fix two headlights, so, that's the main concern. Soon as we have a good idea that it's going to flood, we have to take our cars and move it someplace else. So, you know, we're moving it to Food Lion. They used to, the city used to let you use Carvel Hall to bring your vehicles up to, but then they sold it. So, really the residents have no place to take vehicles when a flood's coming. And some residents you'll see drive their old cars right into the flood because it's just. Anyway, that's another story. Go ahead.

Schatz: Are any, are there any storms or flooding that you remember vividly?

Freeman: I remember Sandy and we had a flood at Christmas time and it wasn't a hurricane that came up right at Christmas and my house was on an island for about three days before the water went out. We couldn't even go to Christmas activities or anything.

Kio: And then, do you feel climate change is something people in Crisfield discuss and plan for, or is it kind of taboo?

Freeman: Some people, I mean I think everybody realizes that climate change has a lot to do with what's going on, but there's not much we can do without government or financial help. I know the city now is talking about putting a seawall around, that should have been done years ago, that kind of stuff. I mean the average taxpayer in- in Crisfield and this is just on my house, pays close to $3,000 a year to live here between county and city tax, and when they can't maintain ditches and stuff, you feel helpless, because you know that we look to them to do the precautions for the flooding and it's not being done. [pauses]

Schatz: Have you participated in any community events surrounding the issues of flooding?

Freeman: They really don't have any. Even after Sandy, there was no communication with the residents on how to get help, how to get rid of your debris. You were basically on your own. That, that is one thing that is definitely lacking here. This town hall that we just had, I think was the first town hall that I can remember having since 1987, you know.

Kio: So, I know you've mentioned that the repairs you had to deal with- with, like your furnace and your water heater, but are there any other major home repairs you've had to make because of flooding or, like anyone you know had to make?

Freeman: Yeah, my porch, whenever the salt water sits for a while, it ruins foundations. Mine is getting weaker, so I know that's going to be an issue. We've had to replace two porches because of the salt waters getting on the porch. [inaudible] We had two times where we paid for major grading in the yard, because when this water comes up, it also not only destroys trees and stuff, it

takes out the topsoil and then you get lower and it's like a vicious cycle. Yeah, but I know of a lot of people in town that homes are condemned because of the mold and stuff. Yeah. [pauses]

Schatz: How has the local economy, particularly industries like fishing, crabbing, and tourism changed over the years?

Freeman: Terribly. I used to work at Handy Seafood, which was right, right where the windmill is in the back there, and we did a lot of it. When I first moved here, there were pickin' houses, soft crab houses, between climate change and the pollution in the bay, it has all kinds of- of reasons. There's hardly any watermen anymore. Handy's has shut down. All the packing houses have shut down. They still call it the crab capital of the world, but you can't get crabs here. So, [laughter] I don't know why.

Kio: And then, kind of piggybacking off of that, how are businesses doing in Crisfield?

Freeman: Terribly, terribly, between the flooding that is in all ways an issue, especially for the ones down at the dock, well, Main Street, there is no more businesses, they, the Main Street looks terrible, but the businesses that are down in Crisfield are really struggling because there's not many business incentives to move here and they deal with the flooding constantly.

Kio: And, do you think that's kind of showing how the future of local businesses are going to look in Crisfield, paired with environmentals, environmental factors?

Freeman: Yeah, I think at this point you'd have to have your head examined to open a business in Crisfield. Honest, I'm just being honest, because there's no incentive here, there's no tourism here because of the way the town looks and the constant flooding. [pauses]

Schatz: Do you have any opinions on how the city, county, and state handled the flooding issues in Crisfield?

Freeman: Terribly, I- I can tell you that, they, they, you know, and then what they'll do is they'll send like they did in Isabel and Sandy, they'll send the National Guard down in these big trucks and the trucks fly down through the flood which creates waves. I mean I had my electric panel, oh, well, that was another expense. I had to move my electric panel up, which was like four, three grand. I mean I'm talking major money that I've putting in. But they'll come through and then the waves come up and make it even worse. But the county, the city, they there, they have no direction for the people in Crisfield. Okay, there's- there's flooding coming, where do we take our cars? Where, you know, give us warning that a flood could occur. There's nothing like that, nothing. Need from the county of Somerset County, from the city. Nothing.

Kio: That kind of leads into the next question which I feel like is also going to have a pretty bleak answer. So, are there any projects regarding the flooding or Crisfield's local economy that excite or concern you? Are there any?

Freeman: Yeah, there's- there's a couple. I know they're applying after the town hall meeting. They are applying for grants, and they do have work being done on the maint- the ditches. But it's not enough. And it's going to take, for what I understand, up to four years. So, you know, I know places like Cove Street and Crisfield is completely covered. Their pumping stations are always broke. Their street was cut off for almost a month because the pumping station was just pumping. You know, this is Somerset Avenue is another avenue where you can't get down. I'm not optimistic on this city. The problem with Crisfield is most of its residents are on public assistance. So, there's no tax base. So, if you don't have a tax base, only from a few people, and you can't draw more people into the city to live or businesses into the city to, you know, put into that tax pot, you live off of grants. So that's basically where the City of Crisfield is now, waiting on grants, applying for grants. You can't survive like that, you just can't. They took, you know, when I first moved to town, I was a real estate agent. And when I first moved the town I couldn't believe that this city, so you have this beautiful marina and right next to it you have projects. Who does that? You take your best of the best land, your most valuable business land, and you turn it into low, I'm not against low-income housing, don't get me wrong, but not on your best waterfront. And then they take the downtown, all downtown should have a buffer and they put up that monstrosity condo right next to the dock. So the whole planning of the city obviously didn't have anybody with any sense, you know, thinking about things.

Schatz: Do you think the younger generation are less likely to stay in Crisfield?

Freeman: Oh, they're all gonna get out. They're all, they're, all my kids have left, and they, you know they live high up, two of them live up the higher in higher road. But there's nothing, there's no higher education here. If there was, I think our- our workforce is not skilled, and half of them barely get through high school. So, what kind of business would come here and create employment if they don't have a skilled workforce? So, that's a problem, you know? That's a problem.

Kio: And so tell us about raising children in Crisfield.

Freeman: Back when I first moved here, it was great. It was safe, my kids, there's actually a documentary on YouTube about the early days in Crisfield, and it, that's how it was. It was like going back to the 1950s. My husband went out with his sister to a restaurant. By the time he got home, I got 15 calls that he was in the restaurant with another woman. That's how it was back then. Everybody knew everybody. Everybody, you know, looked out for each other. And the kids, my boys would take off all day and I wouldn't see them till night. And I didn't have to worry. [pauses] It was nice, it was a nice community to raise- raise kids.

Schatz: Do you think it's still as safe?

Freeman: No, no, I think that happened, I was also a correctional officer at ECI. So when the state built the prison there, they were promised that the inmates coming out of ECI would be

shipped back to where they were arrested from, DC, Baltimore. Well, what happened about after six years, they were just left out of the door. So, you have, and ECI is known as a sex crime jail because the inmates don't kill- kill them there. There is actually honor among inmates and other inmates will go after child molesters, rapists, things like that anyway. So now, every place I go, guess what? I see an ex-inmate because they're over at the projects, they hook up, like the girls from the projects would visit the guys at the prison like it was a dating club. They get out and now they're living with the, and nobody's checking up on it so when you go on websites, and it's not just here, the crime rate in Salisbury has increased. The crime rate in Cambridge has increased. The prison brought a lot of good things because it brought jobs. But the prison right now is like 150 officers short because most of the people here can't qualify to work there. So, you got this, it's good for the people who can work there because it's high paying, good paying, retirement, blah blah blah, but it's also, I mean, when I worked there, there was like 6,000 inmates there. So imagine that criminal effect, because people don't rehabilitate. They just don't. Take my word for it. So when they get out, they're just setting up shop someplace else.

Kio: Alright, and do you see yourself sticking around in Crisfield?

Freeman: No, I don't, because as I age, I'm 65 now, I am not going to be able to run out and pick up stuff and get it up and you know what I mean. I, I'm, I'm looking at my senior years, and I have a couple of friends who live down in the senior part of, you have the projects here and right next to it you have the 65-and-older place and those people are petrified when the tide comes up because they have cars and they're all down on the ground and I can't see my- No, I can't see me living here that much longer.

Schatz: Are you hopeful for the future of Crisfield?

Freeman: No. Oh, go ahead. Finish reading. I'm sorry.

Schatz: What would you like to see happen in the next 20 years?

Freeman: Well, I think what could happen is the seawall would help, if they could put, if they go through with the plans for a seawall. That could, if that doesn't, and our infrastructure is very old, I mean the pipes keep breaking. It seems like the employees they have spend most of their day fixing floodgates, flood pumps, the infrastructure that's aging. Crisfield has so many problems, it's like, where do you start? But I don't have any hopes for the future here. And it's not just me, it's like I said, I run the community garden and everybody's the same way.

Kio: And so, what are your thoughts on this trend towards a relocation, and I know you mentioned you have kids that have relocated and you're considering it yourself, but like?

Freeman: Well, I- I, well first of all, I do, as I mentioned, I have a- a Victorian from 1912. So, even if it was in a dry area, I'm not gonna be able to make a 150-year-old staircase when I'm 85,

but I'm gonna, but, but with that said, when I sell and I've, even if I found the perfect little rancher in Crisfield, I'm not going to buy it because of the flooding, because of the issues of the city. It's going to be up farther where I don't have to deal with this anymore.

Schatz: Would you recommend Crisfield as a place to live?

Freeman: No. No, I would not.

Schatz: Makes sense.

Freeman: No, I would not. The only good thing about Crisfield is you can still get a reasonable house as far as what the medium house is elsewhere. But then again, there's no employment, there's, yeah. So no, even with that, that would be the only thing. But even with that, I wouldn't recommend. In fact, I've had family who said, "What do you think about me buying a condo, or," I said, "No, your investment would be better off someplace else."

Kio: And do you have any tidbits of wisdom you'd like to share with future generations in regards to what's going around here?

Freeman: Yeah, I would, let's say if I had someone in my family that futurely wanted to live in Crisfield. The people are good, they're friendly, they're nosy, but I think if you could make a good life for yourself in Crisfield if, if you buy a house that doesn't flood all the time, and I don't know where that's at. I would basically tell them not to come here, because I don't know of any area in Crisfield that does not flood. You could just look at the Family Dollar, they got their- their sandbags right next to the door. All businesses are like that. [pauses]

Kio: Alright, and that's the end of our questions.

Freeman: Okay!

Kio: Anything else you want to follow up on?

Freeman: No, I'm- I'm, thank you, and I hope I was not as pessimistic as other people, but I've lived here a long time, you know. I've been, not didn't grow up here, but I've lived here with a long times.

Yeah, of course, we appreciate you taking your time to come out.

Freeman: Thank you. I hope something positive comes from, I had to try. Do you need a pen?

Schatz: No, we're good.

Kio: It's alright. Thank you.

Freeman: Okay!

Schatz: Hopefully, we're able to do something to fix the issues.

Kio: Yeah, I hope so because, you know, for future generations and some people are really stuck here, you know, so sad.

[Transcript Ends]